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ABSTRACT

The contemporary view of ethical communication has come full circle, returning to the approach of Aristotle. Almost every public speaking textbook includes discussion of the basic concepts of what Aristotle called ethos, pathos, and logos. Of particular significance is Aristotle's conception of ethos, as elaborated in his work, "The Rhetoric." Ethos was understood by Aristotle as being composed of sincerity/trustworthiness, expertise/knowledge, identification/empathy, and charisma/power. Aristotle's notion of "prohairesis," translated by Charles Chamberlain as "commitment," is important to the analysis of what constitutes an ethical advocate. Many modern theorists agree with Aristotle that the fundamental basis of any communication ethic must be the advocate's ongoing commitment to messages whose outcome the person can affect. Like Aristotle, many of today's scholars believe that an individual's ethical system, at its highest level of development, is based upon internalized convictions rather than external consequences. (Eighteen references are attached.) (SG)

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A Circular Evolution of Perspectives Regarding Ethical Communication?

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What did President Bush know about the arms-for-hostages deal? When did he know? Who was the Speaker of the House who was charged with 69 counts of unethical behavior? Who was the Marine "hero" indicted for diverting funds for personal advantage and lying to Congress? Answers to these questions as well as numerous other nationally publicized scandals have confronted Americans with the paucity of commitment to ethical communication.

According to a 1987 poll in U. S. News and World Report 71 percent of the United States population were dissatisfied with current standards for honesty! Time in a May 25, 1987 issue noted, "Ethics, often dismissed as a prissy Sunday School word, is now the center of a new national debate" (pp. 14-29). This paper will provide a cursory overview of the evolution of communication ethics that has led to ethics being a centerpiece of discussion.

From "Father Aristotle" to contemporary advocates of ethical communication like Richard Johannesen (1983), Richard Weaver (1953), John Merrill, John Lee, and Edward Friedlander (1990) students of communication have come almost full circle. The emphasis in beginning points for ethical communication began with

a commitment to rational choices within an individual, i.e., stress was placed upon the character of the source of messages; moved to philosophical stances which might instruct choices; and seems now to be returning to a call for commitment within the individual which reveals itself in virtuous character.

This paper will briefly examine the concept of an ethical speaker from an Aristotelian perspective, mention in passing some of the major philosophical perspectives upon which a person might ground their choices, and finally note the return to a call for commitment within individuals regardless of with which over-arching scheme they align.

Aristotle's Emphasis on Character and Commitment

Almost every basic Public Speaking textbook includes a discussion of Aristotle's basic concepts of ethos, pathos and logos, even if they are not identified by those terms. An enormous amount of research has been done regarding ethos or character and its fundamental role in the communication process--often referred to as credibility. What is important in this paper is how Aristotle's conception of ethos in The Rhetoric, composed of sincerity/trustworthiness, expertise/ knowledge, identification/empathy, and charisma/power, is impacted by his conceptualization of the role of ethics in public discourse.

As rhetorical and communication theorists concerned with ethical communication in an applied setting, a good place to begin our examination of the evolution of communication ethics is with Aristotle. Charles Chamberlain, a classical scholar, has published two articles that are especially relevant. The first article, "Why Aristotle Called Ethics Ethics: The Definition of [ethos] in Eudemian Ethics 2,2" addresses the issue of how it is the "working in one's soul of [ethos] which brings about moral excellence" (1984, p. 183). The second piece, "The Meaning of Prohairesis in Aristotle's Ethics" explains how "the morally excellent man, the spoudaios, is characterized by acting according to prohairesis" (1984, p. 154). Both of these discussions provide insights regarding the individual and communication ethics.

In Chamberlain's answer to "Why Aristotle Called Ethics Ethics," he investigated several ingredients that are relevant to this discussion. Chamberlain noted that although Aristotle's philosophy was built upon a massive commitment to "rationality," Aristotle did not ignore the irrational soul. Rather, Aristotle conceived of ethos as "the mechanism by which desire is brought into line with reason" (Ethics, 1984, p. 182). In other words, Aristotle believed that the "bipartition of the soul into reasoning: unreasoning is not a perfectly mechanical division"

(Ethics, 1984, p. 177). Instead, the irrational soul, which is the seat of the emotions, participates in reason "in so far as it is obedient to it and carries out its orders" (Ethics, 1984, p. 177). Thus, within Aristotle's conception of the bipartite soul, "the rational soul imposes its orders on the irrational" (Ethics, 1984, p. 178). Furthermore, Aristotle "conceives this process in terms of a ruling part imposing discipline on an inferior and obstreperous part" (Ethics, 1984, p. 178). The result of this conceptualization is that ethos functions as "the part of the irrational soul which can listen to reason" or that ethos "is the mediator in the soul between reason and desire; it brings the unruly impulses and emotions under the sway of reason" (Ethics, 1984, p. 180). Therefore, it is a person's ethos which can "compel fear or anger or desire in general >>to listen to reason<< [sic], and in time to change" (Ethics, 1984, p. 182). A person may believe it proper to "say something" and yet feel the desire to remain silent or plan to say it a certain way while still feeling afraid of losing one's job. Thus, according to Aristotle, a communication ethic begins within the individual speaker/writer. The character or virtue of the source is vitally linked to the internal struggles between the rational and irrational souls.

In his second article, "The Meaning of Prohairesis in Aristotle's Ethics," Chamberlain explains how Aristotle describes being ethical as being virtuous in interactions with others. Thus, in The Rhetoric, while discussing what makes a person worthy of praise, Aristotle notes, "the mark of the virtuous person is that he acts after deliberate moral choice" (p. 52). In the Nichomachean Ethics Aristotle depicts weakness of will as acting "contrary to his prohairesis" while the strong willed person "abides by his prohairesis in resisting desire" (Prohairesis, p. 147). Chamberlain notes how this term prohairesis has most often been translated "choice" (Prohairesis, p. 148). He then convincingly explains how "commitment" is a superior translation since it better explains all stages of "the process by which the orders of reason are brought upon desire so as to change it" (Prohairesis, p. 151.) In other words, prohairesis includes "all parts of this process, from the selecting from deliberation to the point at which desire and reason concur" (Prohairesis, p. 154.) This is why terms like "choice," "intention," "will," and "purpose" are only partially adequate translations since they refer to different stages of the process rather than the process as a whole (Prohairesis, p. 154).

The role of prohairesis becomes significant when considering what constitutes an ethical advocate. As Chamberlain has argued,

translating prohairesis as "commitment" enables one to better understand Aristotle's conception of being an ethical advocate. A person who exercises prohairesis must be committing himself or herself to something within the realm of the possible. That person must be "in the process of forming a new desire or desires" (Prohairesis, p. 157). Thus, the fundamental basis of any communication ethic must be "prohairesis"--an on-going commitment within the individual to messages whose outcome that person can affect. In other words, Aristotle's view of being ethical means that both the rational and irrational parts of the soul need each other's assistance in order for a person to maximize his/her potential. For instance, the rational part of a person prescribes the "when," the "where," and the "how long" a person should express a desires like anger, joy, to speak out, to keep silent, and the like. It is an individual's "prohairesis" or commitment to makes desire accord with reason, that makes ethical communication possible.

Major Ethical Philosophies

A second major element in the evolution of a communication ethic has been the influence of major philosophical approaches. Several centuries after Aristotle argued for his "Golden Mean," founded upon the internal commitment to be a virtuous person, i.e., a person who focuses upon their ethos or "character,"

philosophers from Thomas Aquinas in the 13th Century to John Rawls in the 20th Century have stressed, developed and refined several major ethical systems.

Joseph Dominick (1990), in The Dynamics of Mass Communication, in addressing the ethical principles by which choices may be evaluated and actions justified, has reduced the post-Aristotelian principles into four major categories (pp. 419-421). One is The Categorical Imperative, i.e., what is right for one person is what is right for all people. Immanuel Kant is the major source regarding this ethical guideline. A second is The Principle of Utility, i.e., the greatest good for the largest number of people. Dominant advocates for this approach have been Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. A third approach is The Veil of Ignorance. John Rawls has argued that justice will emerge when everyone is treated equally, i.e., all social differentiations are removed and everyone is treated completely fairly. Dominick's fourth and final synopsis is the Principle of Self-Determination. This is where everyone is seen to have unconditional value and should never be treated as means to any ends.

Merrill, Lee and Friedlander (1990) provide another way of conceptualizing ethical stances. They see all choices and rationales as based upon either a Deontological or a Teleological

perspective of ethics. A deontological approach is solely based upon an absolutist or principle-oriented approach. For instance, the maximum of human rights transcends political systems, corporate goals and individual goals. On the other hand, any ethical system that is based upon consideration of the consequences is inherently teleological, i.e., perspectives like altruism, utilitarianism and egoism (Merrill, Lee and Friedlander, p. 391).

A Return to an Emphasis on Internal Commitment

It seems that contemporary Lawrence Kohlberg, a Harvard psychologist, has designed a progressive model that brings us "full-circle" to Aristotle's position of the virtuous person. Kohlberg provides seven stages: (1) Fear of punishment or might makes right; (2) Hope of reward; (3) Peer or community approval; (4) Because it is the law; (5) Social utility; (6) Justice and duty; and (7) Being an ideal person. According to Kohlberg, a person progresses through these stages until such a time as they are no longer compelled by what they ought to do but are constrained by the nature or essence of being "fully" human.

Along similar lines, contemporary communication scholars have placed the focus back on internalized maximums that compel the source of the information rather than on the consequences. For instance, Karl Wallace (1955) noted that every ethical

communicator must demonstrate four things: (1) A thorough knowledge of the subject on which that person is speaking/writing; (2) A fair presentation of facts and opinions; (3) A report of all sources of information; and, (4) that ethical communicators display a tolerance for dissent. This seems especially significant in a world that appropriately celebrates diversity. Rather than squabble over which ethical system is superior, ethical communicators must respect other's choices while controlling their own exchanges by Wallace's other three principles.

As Cox and Jensen (1989) have argued, Kenneth Anderson, Robert Bostrom and Don Stewart provide helpful guidelines for a communication ethic. Kenneth Anderson's Presidential Address to the Speech Communication Association Convention in 1983 provides six excellent principles upon which an ethical code may be built. Anderson's principles are: (1) Accept responsibility for articulated positions; (2) Communicate so as to enhance future interaction; (3) Maximize the freedom of choice of auditors while seeking to benefit society as a whole; (4) Communicate in such a way as to preserve respect for all persons involved; (5) Seek to enhance communication skill and awareness; and (6) Insure the application of the code in all communication situations. In a similar manner, Robert Bostrom, in his Presidential Address to

the Southern States Communication Association in April of 1986, proposed three additional guiding principles for a "communication ethic." Bostrom asserted that (1) lying does not normally occur; (2) persuasion is superior to coercion; and, (3) altruism is not only possible but necessary. Finally, Don Stewart (1986) of Temple University, basing his code of ethics on general semantics, provides two extensions to ethical discourse. First, ethical exchanges are reflexive, i.e., self-scrutiny of one's evidence, reasoning and motives is essential. Second, discourse is bilateral, i.e., a mutual personal and intellectual risk is taken by everyone involved.

Conclusions

As has been argued, it appears that the evolution of communication ethics has come almost full circle. As noted by Johannesen (1990) regarding assessment of political candidates, several political scientists believe that political candidates are actually evaluated along four lines: competence, integrity, reliability, and charisma. For a student of rhetoric, these lines of evaluation sound almost identical to Aristotle's conceptualization of ethos. Granted, this is only one set of testimonials from one discipline. To draw from Agee, Ault and Emery (1988), they depict the social and ethical responsibilities of the media with five concentric circles. Their innermost

circle represents "the professional standards and ethical practices of **individuals** [sic]" while the next four circles expand until they ultimately reach the "limits that people will tolerate regarding all types of human activity" (p. 514). Their conceptualization also supports the claim of this paper that the root issue is the ethos and prohairesis of sources of information. And, in spite of White's (1990) warning of "overemphasizing individual decision-making" when teaching courses in communication ethics, this author believes that the Aristotelian concepts of ethos and prohairesis have significant utility in communication ethics. Furthermore, as White has noted regarding Arnett's review of articles treating communication ethics, "choice-making" appears to be the "primary ethical construct for communication" (White, 1990, p. 269). Therefore, the "return" to an emphasis on the character centered dimensions of a commitment to ethical discourse seems to almost be a circular evolution.

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